



Faculty of Humanities

GUIDELINES FOR THE PREPARATION OF A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

This document is intended to assist Masters and PhD students in preparing their research proposals. A research proposal is a plan of action; it sets out the aims of your research project and how you intend to achieve these aims. It is usually the case that as research students embark on their projects, their research questions and plans undergo some adjustment. However, the advantage of a good research proposal is that it provides a focus for your research activity and a benchmark against which you can make whatever adjustments become necessary.

The proposal for a Master's thesis is usually between 5 and 10 typed pages; that for a Doctoral thesis, between 10 and 15 pages.

For Masters students embarking on a mini-dissertation, all that is required by the Faculty of Humanities is the title of your project, and the name of your supervisor. In the case of students who are intending to register for a Masters degree by dissertation only, the Faculty allows for a period of provisional registration, during which time you are able to work with a supervisor in putting together your research proposal. Your proposal must be submitted to the Faculty office within six months of first registration.

All students, whether registered for mini or full dissertations, will be allocated a supervisor who will guide them through the various stages of producing the project. You can expect your supervisor to meet with you on average every two weeks. In the initial stages of your project, this might be more often. If you wish to have work read and commented on, this should be submitted at least a week in advance of your tutorial appointment.

The following headings are intended to assist you in writing a proposal. You may find that in writing your proposal, you want to use different headings, and order your account differently. This is perfectly in order, as long as the basic issues set out here are covered.

1. TITLE

As indicated above, the title of your thesis will be registered, so the title needs to be brief and descriptive. It should provide a fairly clear idea of what your thesis is about.

2. FOCAL RESEARCH QUESTION/PROBLEM

A thesis or dissertation is the investigation of a problem. This research problem or question provides the focus for the entire project. What is it that you wish to investigate? Can you specify crisply the question (or problem) that your thesis sets out to address? You should aim to state a single research question, which you may then choose to flesh out through a number of sub-questions. Bear in mind that a dissertation (Ph.D, Masters, mini or full) should be a well-contained, tightly-focused and coherent piece of work that examines an issue in some depth.

3. RATIONALE

Having identified the question or problem you wish to address through your research project, you need to say something about how/why this question has arisen. For some students, the research project emerges out of a theoretical interest, for others it emerges out of issues of practice. Whatever the case, you should signal briefly why you have chosen the question that you have, and what contribution you think the completed research project might make to our understanding of the field.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

When you have registered your proposal and got into the swing of the research project, you will need to undertake a thorough review of the literature pertaining to your research question. For the purposes of the research proposal, you need to have read sufficiently in the field to justify your research question (Why is it important? Have other academics taken up this question in the same or similar ways? How do current debates in your own field of study bear on your research question? Your literature review must assist you in addressing these issues. It will provide information on how your own, or related, research questions have been investigated by other academics in your own (and other, related) fields. It will also provide you with resources to build your own conceptual framework. The literature review thus has two broad aims, to familiarise you with both the *theoretical* and *empirical* work which can inform your study.

5. CONCEPTUAL OR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For many students, their research question emerges from theoretical debates in their field, and they draw from these in order to undertake their own projects. The key concepts are drawn from relevant theory which then needs to be discussed in the thesis itself, with key ideas defined closely. For the purposes of the proposal, it is necessary to discuss very briefly what theoretical ideas will be drawn on, and attempt to define key concepts as tightly as possible.

Not all studies foreground an explicit theoretical base to the same degree. Some emphasise a broader empirical engagement. In this case, there remains the need for an analytic framework to be developed, which defines key concepts, demonstrates how these link together and identifies the variables that will be selected as indicators of these concepts (i.e. how these concepts are to be recognised in the data).

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

Masters and PhD research studies invariably involve some kind of empirical work. This means that the researcher enters a field to collect data, the analysis of which will allow the research question to be addressed. Such a field may comprise part of an archive of, say, historical and/or policy documents. In either case, a number of crucial decisions need to be made about conducting this empirical work:

Sampling: Where will you collect data from? If you are doing archival research of an historical nature, over what time period will your study extend? What documents will form part of your data? Which will you leave out? On what basis will you make this decision? A range of important decisions need to be made, about how to make the project meaningful, but at the same time manageable in terms of the time frame and resources available.

Data collection instruments: Developing a research design means making decisions about *who* (or what, in the case of textually-based studies) to approach for the purposes of data collection. It also means making decisions about *what* data to collect. These decisions need to be constantly referred back to your research question: what kind of data do you need in order to address it? Collected how? Different kinds of instruments are available; will you use (maybe adapt) some instrument presently in use, or develop your own?

7. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The analysis of your data will form the spine of your final research report, the focus around which all other aspects of the thesis will turn. For the purposes of your proposal, you should, if you can, specify how you intend to analyse your data. If you are using statistical tests, then you should specify which you will use and why. If you are analysing qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, you should provide some indication of how you intend to proceed in analysing these.

8. RESEARCH ETHICS

If you are doing a documentary analysis - the ethical concerns might be straightforward and minimal but if your research involves work with human subjects, the ethical concerns might be quite complex. Either way, you should refer to the UCT Code of Ethics for Research as a guide. THIS IS ON THE UCT WEB-SITE AT THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS: <http://www.uct.ac.za>

9. TIME LINE

Try and develop a plan of work for the completion of your thesis, so that you set aside time for conducting a literature review and developing your research design, conducting fieldwork, analysing data and writing up the report. This will assist you in pacing your progress through the thesis, and also in planning a manageable project. Fieldwork that lasts six months may be appropriate for a PhD student, but is probably not such a good idea for a student attempting to finish a mini-dissertation in one year!

10. SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY

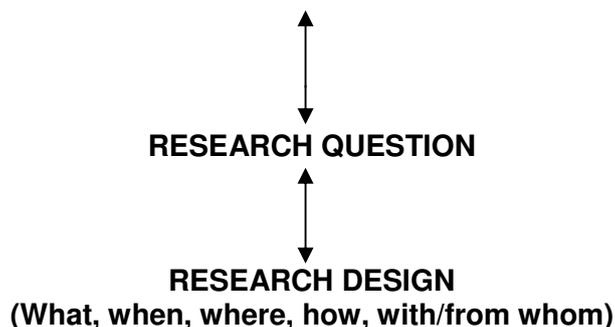
The last part of your research proposal should contain a sample bibliography. This provides a guide to reading you have already done, or plan to do, in developing your research project. Put down the key theoretical and methodological texts you have drawn on, or intend to draw on, as well as that literature, both theoretical and empirical, which bears on your own study. The sample bibliography should not be longer than a page.

At every step along the way in planning your research project, you should ask yourself if all the elements link together in a coherent and rigorous way. Is the literature review relevant to the research question? Is your research design an appropriate way to address this question? A good thesis is coherent, well-focused and well-written, and achieving this is something you need to strive for from the very start of your project.

FRAMING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

Framing a clear research question is a crucial part of developing your research proposal, and should be seen as emerging from a dialogue between a developing theoretical position and decisions you need to take about research design and subsequent data analysis.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ANTECEDENTS



The following criteria are intended as a **GUIDE** to assist you in framing your research question, and enabling you to assist your peers in developing their own.

1. Does the research question provide a clear idea of what the research project is about/hopes to address?
2. Is the question one that can be addressed by research?
3. Is the question researchable?
4. Is it possible to deduce from the research question:
 - a) possible "answers" or modes of addressing the question?
 - b) feasible fieldwork, in terms of sampling and data collection?
5. A researchable question will provide some indication of how the research design is likely to unfold. If you think about the fieldwork component of the project (that is, your data collection) can this be contained comfortably within a two-month period? This is not a hard and fast rule, but a guide. Masters students expecting to complete their projects in a year need to be very clear about their fieldwork and what length of time this will take. A time period in excess of two months for fieldwork is likely to cause problems.
6. Is the question interesting, relevant and important? Is it important that it should be so?
7. Is there a single question? You should *aim* for a single research question, developed through sub-questions, rather than generate a collection of questions, although this is not always possible.
8. A good research question, although it is addressed through a fairly small-scale empirical study, is drawn from more general theoretical and methodological issues. Does the research question emerge from and point only at a local context, or does it emerge from a broader set of disciplinary or professional issues?